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ABSTRACT

Various lines of research demonstrate that children do not need intensive phonics instruction to develop the functional command of letter/sound patterns that they need as readers. The fact that children normally learn highly complex processes and systems by merely interacting with the external world is perhaps the most important reason why children do not need systematic and intensive phonics instruction. Other reasons (based on research) are: (1) English is an alphabetic language, but by no means a phonetic one; (2) spelling/sound relationships are extremely complex, so complex that commonly taught phonics generalizations are not reliable; (3) patterns of letters are much more consistent than the relationships between single sounds and syllables; (4) it is much easier for young children to hear and grasp syllables and syllable-like units in written language than to hear separate letter sounds; (5) proficient reading involves using everything readers know to get words and construct meaning from text; (6) too much emphasis on phonics encourages children to use "sound it out" as their first and possibly only independent strategy for dealing with problem words; (7) many emergent readers are not good at learning analytically, abstractly, or auditorily; (8) research purporting to demonstrate the superiority of intensive systematic phonics over incidental phonics (most of which is pre-1967) is not very impressive; and (9) more recent research comparing whole language classrooms with traditional skills-based classrooms (including those that emphasize phonics) has found that children develop phonics skills as well or better in whole language classrooms as measured on standardized tests. (Contains 41 references.) (RS)

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Phonics Revisited

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Recently the intensive and systematic teaching of phonics has been demanded by various special interest groups, such as the Reading Reform Foundation, the Eagle Forum, and, of course, companies that sell phonics programs like *Hooked on Phonics*. However, various lines of research demonstrate that children do not need intensive phonics instruction to develop the functional command of letter/sound patterns that they need as readers.

Young children are amazing learners. In the first few years of their life, they learn to feed themselves, to walk, and to speak their native language--all with little, if any, direct instruction. These accomplishments are all the more impressive when we consider in detail the nature of these acts. In learning to speak English, for example, young children learn, at an unconscious level, the rule for making regular verbs past tense: add a / t / sound if the verb ends in an unvoiced consonant (*laughed, talked*), a / d / sound if the verb ends in a voiced consonant or a vowel (*giggled, cried*), or a vowel plus / d / if the verb already ends in / t / or / d / (*waited, waded*). We know children have learned this as a rule when they abandon previously "correct" past tenses like *went* and *bought* for the regular but "incorrect" *goed* and *buyed*. Similarly, young children internalize and utilize the basic syntactic patterns of the language, such as *subject + verb + object*. They also learn many other patterns that we adults rarely are conscious of, such as the order of auxiliary verbs (if we have two or three auxiliaries, they occur in this order: modal auxiliary like *can* or *will*, then a form of *to have*, then a form of *to be*--as in "She *might have been* driving").

Such evidence demonstrates beyond a doubt the powerful learning abilities of young children. The fact that they normally learn highly complex processes and systems by

merely interacting with the external world is perhaps the most important reason why children do not need to be taught phonics intensively and systematically. This and other reasons will be listed and briefly described below, with references to supporting research.

Why NOT to Teach Phonics Intensively and Systematically

1. *Kids don't need such thorough, direct, and systematic teaching.* Their learning as babies, toddlers, and preschoolers gives ample evidence that we do not need to directly teach everything that children need to know, and that indeed the most complex processes--such as speaking their native language and learning to read and write--are among those processes which can be much better learned through experience, with the support of adults but with little direct teaching. As Don Holdaway explains it, such natural learning involves four major phases: Observation of demonstrations, guided participation, unsupervised practice in the entire process, and performance--the sharing of one's accomplishments (Holdaway, 1986). Further extending Holdaway's model into the development of literacy, Brian Cambourne (1988) implies that one of the most important roles adults play in fostering children's development is encouraging children to take risks as learners, to "have a go" at reading, and not to worry initially about identifying or sounding out every word. Phonics knowledge develops within the context of real reading and writing.

2. *English is an alphabetic language but by no means a phonetic or phonemic one in which one sound equals only one symbol, and vice versa.* For one thing, meaning rather than sound determines many of our spellings. Consider some common homonyms: *son, sun; break, brake; no, know; meat, meet, mete; right, write, rite*. Further evidence of the meaning basis of some of our spellings comes from pairs or sets of word that spell meaning-related parts the same way, despite the differences in sound: *medicine, medical; music, musician; site, situation; sign, signal, bomb, bombardier*. Clearly not all letters

have one and only one sound. Consonants are most reliable, but take *t*, for instance: it sounds like / t / in some contexts, but it combines with other letters to make other sounds, as well (as in *thin, those, catch, lotion*). As if these examples were not enough to discourage a heavy phonics approach to reading, there are also dialects to complicate the picture: for example, *-og* words like *frog, dog, smog, log*, and *hog* are not pronounced the same throughout the country. Heavy emphasis on phonics makes learning to read unnecessarily difficult for those children whose oral language patterns differ from the patterns assumed in the instructional materials.

3. *In short, spelling/sound relationships are extremely complex.* Merely to represent the spelling-to-sound mappings of 80-90% of English words--that is, ignoring true exceptions--it has generally been found that hundreds of correspondences are involved (Hanna et al., 1966, as cited in Adams, 1990, p. 242). Nor is this complexity confined to words that are used primarily by adults rather than children. In one of the more extensive studies, Berdiansky and her associates discovered that over 6000 words in the one- and two-syllable words of six-to-nine year olds involved 211 separate spelling/sound correspondences: that is, 211 correspondences between a letter and a sound, or between two letters functioning together (like *th*) and a sound (Berdiansky, Cronnell, and Koehler, 1969, p. 11). Furthermore, even the fewer patterns often taught to children as "rules" are in many cases not very reliable: for instance, Clymer found that only 18 of 45 commonly taught phonics generalizations are reliable 75% of the time or more (Clymer, 1963). Typically, about two-thirds of these oft-unreliable rules deal with vowels, y-t v-w-ls -r- m-ch l-ss -s-f-l th-n c-ns-n-nts -n s-gn-l-ng wh-t - w-rd -s, a- -ou -a- --o-a-y -e-- -y --yi-- -o -ea- --i- -e-e-e. Cl-rl- n-t -ll v-s-l -nf-rm-t-n -s -q--ll- -mp-rt-nt. It is fortunate that children do not need to be directly taught all the letter/sound patterns and correspondences, especially for vowels, because letter/sound relations in English are complex indeed. Such complexity reveals the ridiculousness of the

following assertion from Rudolph Flesch's oft-cited *Why Johnny Can't Read*: "Teach the child what each letter stands for and he can read" (Flesch, 1955, p. 10).

4. *In alphabetic languages like English, patterns of letters are used to represent patterns of sounds.* These patterns are much more consistent than the relationships between single sounds and syllables (Goodman, 1993; Adams, 1990).

5. *It is much easier for young children to hear and grasp syllables and syllable-like units in written language than to hear separate letter sounds.* Also, proficient readers seem to process letters in syllable-like chunks, during fluent reading. Therefore it seems best to emphasize not the sounds of single letters and digraphs per se, but syllables and the most salient parts into which they can be divided: the *onsets* and *rimes* of syllables (for summaries of relevant research, see Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Adams, 1990). The *onset* consists of any consonants that might precede the vowel (*fright, slay, chain*). The *rime* consists of a vowel sound (the only obligatory part of a syllable), plus any consonant sounds that might optionally follow the vowel (*I, eye, might, isle*, for instance). The pronunciation of vowels in such rime patterns is far more stable than the pronunciation of vowels considered as single letters or vowel digraphs (*a, ai, e, ea, ow*, and so forth). Thus to the limited extent that it does make sense to call children's attention to letter/sound relationships, we should probably emphasize onsets and rimes. However, research on emergent literacy (e.g. Hall, 1987) demonstrates that even these patterns do not need to be taught systematically or intensively. Most children learn them from repeated immersion in shared reading experiences (Holdaway, 1982) and rereading of favorite texts.

6. *Proficient reading involves using everything you know to get words and construct meaning from a text.* Fluent readers can identify many words on sight, even in word lists (e.g. Stanovich, 1991), yet identifying words by letter/sound patterns alone does not seem

to be the way proficient readers normally read connected text (Goodman, 1973, 1982; for a line of reasoning that reconciles seemingly conflicting evidence, see Weaver, 1994, Chapter 5). In a recent study with first graders, for instance, Freppon (1991) found that children taught reading through a traditional skills-based curriculum tried to sound out words more than twice as often as the children in literature-based classrooms where skills were not taught in isolation. However, the children in the literature-based classrooms were much more successful in sounding out words (53% of the time, compared with 32%), because they were simultaneously using prior knowledge and context in an effort to construct meaning from the text, not merely trying to sound out the word as if it stood in isolation. Learning phonics skills in isolation is not nearly as valuable as learning to read words in context. We need to help children use letter/sound knowledge *along with* meaning, as they read authentic texts.

7. *Too much emphasis on phonics encourages children to use "sound it out" as their first and possibly only independent strategy for dealing with problem words* (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988). Similarly, overemphasizing phonics may be especially damaging for children who have had few experiences with books prior to school. Of course they need to develop a functional grasp of letter/sound patterns and relationships, but first they need numerous experiences of being read to, and of themselves reading along with the text as stories, poems, and rhymes are read to them.

8. *Many emergent readers are not good at learning analytically, abstractly, or auditorily. For them, the study of phonics is difficult, if not impossible.* This conclusion is suggested partly by Piagetian studies of child development (e.g. Wadsworth, 1989), but also by research into learning styles and reading styles (e.g. Carbo, 1987, both references). Thus teaching and testing phonics patterns and rules may result in many children's quickly being

labeled as dyslexic or reading disabled, or simply as slow readers, when the main problem is the mismatch between the children's learning style and the instructional program.

9. *The research purporting to demonstrate the superiority of intensive systematic phonics over incidental phonics (e.g. Chall, 1983) is not very impressive.* The best of these studies were re-examined by testing expert Richard Turner, who concluded from these nine randomized field studies "that systematic phonics falls into that vast category of weak instructional treatments with which education is perennially plagued." In comparison with basal-reader/whole-word instruction, systematic phonics produced a slight and early advantage on standardized tests, but "this difference does not last long and has no clear meaning for the acquisition of literacy" (Turner, 1989, p. 283). Most of these studies were undertaken before 1967, long before the advent of classrooms wherein natural, whole language learning has been emphasized.

10. *More recent research comparing whole language classrooms with traditional skills-based classrooms (including those that emphasize phonics) has found that children develop phonics skills as well or better in whole language classrooms, as measured on standardized tests.*¹ In such classrooms, phonics is taught and learned in the context of authentic reading and writing (see the ERIC digest "Phonics in Whole Language Classrooms"). Most important, however, are the other differences that demonstrate the real power of natural, whole language learning and teaching (e.g. Dahl & Freppon, 1992; Stice & Bertrand, 1990; Kasten & Clarke, 1989; Freppon, 1993, 1991; Clarke, 1988; Ribowsky, 1985). The six studies summarized in Weaver, 1994 (see also Weaver, 1990; Stephens, 1991) and the nine studies of learning English as a second language summarized in Elley (1991) seem to warrant the following additional generalizations about children in whole language classrooms, compared with those in skills-based classrooms that (to a greater or lesser degree) teach phonics in isolation. The whole language children seem (1) to develop

greater facility in *using* phonics knowledge effectively; (2) to develop vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and punctuation skills as well or better than children in more traditional classrooms; (3) to be more inclined and able to read for meaning, rather than just to identify words; (4) to develop more strategies for dealing with problems in reading, such as problems in identifying words; (5) to develop greater facility in writing; (6) to develop a stronger sense of themselves as readers and writers; and (7) to develop greater independence as readers and writers. Based upon research with children from preschool through grade 2, these generalizations must still be considered tentative. However, the results from these studies strongly suggest the superiority of a natural, whole language emphasis that develops phonics knowledge in the context of authentic reading and writing.

For a related treatment of these issues, see the information sheets in Edelsky, 1992. For practical ideas on developing phonics knowledge through reading and writing, see Freppon and Dahl, 1991; Mills, O'Keefe, & Stephens, 1992; Powell & Hornsby, 1993; Weaver, 1994, 1990; White, 1990.

¹Stahl and Miller's oft-cited 1989 study must be discounted because it lumped whole language together with language experience, which is at most only one technique used in a whole language classroom.

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